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Research on Bath Towel Fabrics Department of Agriculture

A radio talk by Miss Ruth Van Deman, Bureau of Home Economics, delivered in the Department of Agriculture period of the National Farm and Home Hour, broadcast by a network of 48 associate NBC stations, Thursday, May 20, 1937.

MR. SALISBURY: As usual on Thursdays, the first speaker in our Department of Agriculture period here in Washington is Ruth Van Deman. And as usual she comes to give you a report on some of the research work of the Bureau of Home Economics.

Ruth, is that a new bulletin you've got there? I've never seen that picture of blankets or whatever they are all over the cover.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, this is our last guide for buying sheets, blankets, and bath towels.

MR. SALISBURY: Bath towels. Are those little pieces of bath towel stuck on that card in your other hand?

MISS VAN DEMAN: Yes, Morse, they are. But you're stealing my thunder right and left.

MR. SALISBURY: Oh, I didn't mean to, Ruth. But when I see a new one of your home economics bulletins, I guess my announcing instincts run away with me. But since the cat's out of the bag, let me read the full title.

MISS VAN DEMAN: O.K., Morse.

MR. SALISBURY: This latest contribution from the textile specialists is called "Guides for buying sheets, blankets, and bath towels." Now, Ruth, I'll take myself to the far corner of the studio and let you tell about those little pieces of towels.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Don't go too far, Morse. I'm glad to have you come in with a question now and then. Your questions always bring out very good points, that I might overlook.

Going back a bit from these samples of towels. It was about three years ago, if I remember right, that Margaret Hays and Bess Viemont began their study on the fiber, and weave, and other points that give a bath towel its ability to take up water quickly and thoroughly when you rub your body with it. And of course most of us also want a towel that will last a long time, as well as rub dry as long as it lasts. And we don't want to pay more than a moderate price, unless we're giving the bride a present for her linen chest. Then we feel justified in paying the premium for style.

To start their research going, the textile people bought sixty pairs of bath towels from retail stores. So there wouldn't be any complications from dye on the fibers, they chose only all-white towels or ones with a little color in the border. The price ranged all the way from 14 cents up to \$1.50 a towel.

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This card I brought with me that Mr. Salisbury mentioned a moment ago has swatches from three of these towels, with all the data on price, place of purchase, and so on written below it. This is part of the permanent record in this towel study.

Most of these towels they proceeded to cut up into pieces for laboratory analysis and tests. And some they put into a regular service test. They're being used and washed as they would be under normal home conditions.

To me the way the research people go about studying textiles in a laboratory is fascinating - partly perhaps because the novelty hasn't worn off yet. And textile research is a very new branch, comparatively speaking. Our people have had to develop many of their methods as they went along, and even invent equipment.

Yesterday when I was down in their laboratory, I found them using a device they'd invented for determining the water capacity of bath towels. They were dripping water onto the samples from a glass tube held in just a certain position, and checking the weight of the wet fabric with the dry. Then with another very ingenious device they were studying the rate at which turkish toweling takes up moisture.

In other words they are systematically trying to find out how much water these towels will absorb and how fast they will do it. They had also analyzed the weave in each one and knew whether it is single ply, two-ply, single or double loop, and how many yarns it has in the pile and the ground warp.

Because of the loops all over the surface of a bath towel, it's hard for those of us who aren't textile experts to tell very much about the weave itself, whether it's firm or sleazy. We can tell something by the selvage and the border. But generally that's all. What these research people are after is to find out precisely which combination in weave, yarn, and so on, will make the most satisfactory towel, one you might call grade A. And what would make a second quality, or grade B, and so on down the line.

Maybe some day we'll be buying our bath towels by grade instead of by guess as we're doing now. Even though that's still far in the future, I thought you'd like to know a little bit about the research that is laying the groundwork.

But with that research still unfinished, maybe you are wondering why the new bulletin on guides to buying bath towels. The reason is this. Scientific research like woman's work is never done. And we had so much useful information about bath towels that we decided we'd go ahead and let you have it now. Then revise and add to it as we get new facts.

For instance, on strength, the textile people say very emphatically that if you have boys in the family or somebody who is hard on bath towels, it will pay you in the long run to buy the kind with a ground warp of two-ply yarn.

When Miss Hays told me this I asked her how anybody could tell whether the yarns were two-ply or single ply. She said you can't by looking at them.

And there are no labels at present to help you. But you can ask the buyer in the store. He'll know which of his goods are ply towels. That's what he'll probably call those with two-ply ground warp.

These strong threads of high quality cotton anchor the loops firmly into the body of the fabric. They make a strong towel that can 'take it' when some young giant grabs it by the opposite corners and pulls it across his back as though it were a piece of india rubber.

But we've all seen plenty of towels that can't stand that for long - ones full of loose, puffy places that look as though a drawstring had broken somewhere. And as a matter of fact it had. The drawstring was the ground warp that had given away.

If you ever happened to keep a record on how many years or months of service you get from your towels, then you know that the loose, sleazy kind isn't really economical for regular use. Miss Hays has records on some of good quality that have been used and washed over 90 times, and are still going strong. Others went to pieces after 28 washings.

When you are choosing bath towels, Miss Hays says to look very critically at the selvage. If it is a firmly woven selvage on both sides of the towel, then you can be pretty sure you are getting a good article. She's got me so trained that the selvage is just about the first thing I look at when I buy bath towels.

And another thing that's sometimes deceiving is the size of towels. Oftentimes the "specials" that you see on bargain tables are odd sizes. They may be cut short or woven narrow to sell at an attractive price. Of course what you want in a bath towel is a sufficient number of square inches of that soft fluffy looped surface to dry your wet body. So if you get skimp cut towels, maybe you are skimping yourself on comfort.

Mr. SALISBURY: Well, Ruth, I don't want to skimp you on time here.

MISS VAN DEMAN: You certainly haven't, Morse. And bath towels I'm afraid are a rather dry subject to talk about.

Mr. SALISBURY: Drying, Ruth. Never dry as long as you bring out practical points.

Now I'd like to repeat the title of this new bulletin "Guides for buying sheets, blankets, bath towels." Send your requests for it to Ruth Van Deman, at the Bureau of Home Economics here in Washington.

MISS VAN DEMAN: Morse, before I go may I add just a word about the canning bulletin talk of last week?

MR. SALISBURY: Certainly, go ahead.

MISS VAN DEMAN: I've been very much interested in the questions on canning that have come in in letters. I haven't always been able to write a personal reply, but the bulletin really has the answers, and we're mailing that to you as fast as we can. The title of this one is: "Home Canning of Fruits, Vegetables, and Meats." If any of you aren't sure about time-temperature tables or about how to handle your berries or beans, drop me a card and I'll send you a copy of the canning bulletin.

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